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Creating Socialization and Empathy through Athletics in Chris Crutcher's Fiction

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JOSEPH KORWIN

(Under the direction of Professor Caren J. Town)

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to highlight the ways participation in athletics promote greater physical, psychological, and social health for adolescents in Chris Crutcher's fiction. In his novels, *Ironman* and *Whale Talk*, published in 1995 and 2001 respectively, Crutcher uses athletically minded protagonists and the teams which form around them to display the benefits of being involved in athletics, especially team sports. In *Ironman*, a mandatory high school anger management group embodies all the aspects of team support and camaraderie in their attempt to assist Bo in achieving his athletic goals. Crutcher's *Whale Talk* depicts the ways that official team participation can help adolescents to learn to be better people; making them better citizens as they become adults. Sports has become neglected as a subject in powerful literature, but Chris Crutcher's work combines athletics and quality fiction which speaks to adolescents and adults alike.

INDEX WORDS: Chris Crutcher, Sports, YA Fiction, *Ironman*, *Whale Talk*.

CREATING SOCIALIZATION AND EMPATHY THROUGH ATHLETICS IN CHRIS CRUTCHER'S FICTION

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents Joseph J. Korwin and Patricia D. Korwin.

Thanks to them, I was able to pursue such a gratifying project.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

American writer, therapist, and educator Chris Crutcher has published many critically praised and some publically banned Young Adult novels centered on protagonists with a passion for athletics. His books indicate that involvement in athletics can help both emotional and cognitive processes in adolescents. For Crutcher, sports help individuals "take care of the vessel" which houses the mind ("Ask Chris Crutcher"). Through his work, Crutcher pushes the educational system to acknowledge the importance of good physical health in promoting the mental health of students through the camaraderie and loyalty required of team members. For Crutcher, engagement in sporting activities also brings together students with different backgrounds and living situations. Crutcher's novels illustrate that the bus rides to meets and matches, where conversation among teammates occurs, are just as important for the characters' development as the actual athletic events. The value of a team is both personal and social, he argues, providing a healthy physical out-let for emotion and creating conversation, which then contributes to a greater sense of empathy in the participants.

In spite of their valuable lessons, Crutcher's books have been taken off the shelves of public and private school libraries because there has been controversy over the sometimes violent and sexual subject matter found in his novels. Removing his texts from school curricula seems illogical, given Crutcher's interest in helping adolescents control their emotions. Those concerned with this issue should keep in mind that Crutcher's background as clinical psychologist makes him keenly aware of the realities of childhood and adolescent trauma. In fact, some of his characters are loosely based on patients he has observed. A therapist's goal is to bring out the stories of patients and those he or she is counseling. Crutcher's experience hearing the stories of troubled adolescents provides better insight into how they structure and focus the tales they tell. Like most of Crutcher's novels, the two novels in the study focus on the ways in

which an adolescent protagonist must find a way to connect a team, be it official or unofficially recognized, by creating conversation, a sense of internal loyalty in the group, and empathy.

For example, most of the characters and events in Crutcher's critically acclaimed 2001 novel *Whale Talk* are based on a 1996 school shooting in Moses Lake, Washington. A young man at Frontier Junior High School, who had been bullied, brought a shotgun to school, shot the bully, and killed a teacher and another student. Barry Lukidis, an extremely troubled and angry young man lined the other students in the classroom against a wall and prepared to assassinate them. In the next classroom, the wrestling coach heard the gun shots and was able to enter the room and wrestle the weapon away from the deranged young man ("Author Chris Crutcher.")[1] This terrible scene likely unfolded, Crutcher believes, because Lukidis felt marginalized, ostracized, and not part of the "team" that constituted his high school. Perhaps involvement in sports or even private athletic pursuits could have helped Lukidis control his rage and anger.

What troubled Crutcher most about the killing was that the young man seemed very similar to patients he had dealt with in the past. He told a local radio station: "I've been working in the world of child abuse and neglect a long time…This is a wakeup call because I'm thinking back on some of the kids I know. I don't know anybody that has done a school shooting, but I know a lot of people that have that kind of rage" ("Author Chris Crutcher"). Watching the footage of the shooting, Crutcher started wondering what it was like to be in the room where the shooting occurred: "I began to think, Man, how you get to be Barry Lukidis?" ("Author Chris Crutcher"). He then began assembling a cast of various character types—the bullying jock, the affable dweeb, and an academically challenged child—furiously writing his fictionalized version of the Moses Lake shooting. During this period, more and more shootings happened. Just before the release of the fictional Barry Lukidis story, the tragedy at Columbine High School occurred, and Crutcher realized that he knew that his book was un-publishable "because it would look like

exploitation" ("Author Chris Crutcher"). Crutcher claimed after watching the Columbine shooting unfold on the news that he called his editor and told her to throw his manuscript in the trash. Crutcher thought, "How I can bring this group of diverse characters together?" ("Author Chris Crutcher"). After a period of reflection, Crutcher decided to use a familiar vehicle to accomplish this purpose: sports. He took the characters from a book he felt would have been insensitive to release, placed those characters on a team, and the result became one of his most controversial and compelling novels, *Whale Talk*. Choosing to write a book with such challenging subject matter as infanticide and murder using sports an adolescent protagonist was a deliberate choice.

Crutcher has become a leading figure in the world of YA Sports Literature, which has seen many transformations since it began in the United States. The late 20th century saw a great increase in the publication of complex YA sports fiction--a genre which was at that time barely recognized by literary criticism. An early figure in the expansion of research on the historical significance of YA sports fiction is Wiley Lee Umphlett, who identified YA sports fiction as beginning in the 1890s. From this period till around the 1950s, juvenile sports novels were didactic in nature, mostly aiming to teach adolescents the values of hard work and fair play.[2] Umphlett designates John R. Tunis, whose career began in the late 1940s, as a pioneer in YA sports fiction for his "serious approach to dramatizing sports' commitment to the codes and values and its impact on the athlete's striving for quality performance within a team setting" (Umphlett 14).[3] Crutcher would be part of a new breed whose stories not only had values, but transmit those values more broadly within a larger narrative.

Crutcher was a significant part of the group of emerging talents in sports based YA fiction in the 1980s. Chris Crowe has written extensively on Crutcher, who wrote the forward for Crowe's *More Than a Game*. In his book, Crowe came up with a term to describe the works

of this new breed of YA sports novelists like Crutcher: "*sportlerroman*, a form of the traditional *bildungsroman* apprenticeships novel, where the protagonist is an athlete struggling to maturity. Like the *künstlerroman* where the protagonist is an artist, the *sportlerroman* is a coming-of-age story of an athlete" (21). Crowe adds that these are "novels where the main character is an athlete, but the central issues of the stories are only tangentially connected to sports" (130). Crutcher's novels appeal to a wide range of athletes and non-athletes because they focus on the difficulties found on and off the field. Both *Ironman* and *Whale Talk* fit nicely into the genre of the *sportlerroman.*

Furthermore, Crowe maintains that the conflicts facing Crutcher's characters place them "in the arena of life, the same arena authors of the *sportlerroman* and other serious novels are most interested in" (Crowe 41). In his book, Crowe states that "Crutcher's characters are athletes confronting social and emotional challenges; his stories feature some game action, but their main conflicts lie outside the field of play" (32). However, Crutcher's work in many ways transcends the genre of YA Sports literature due to his ability to carry athletic themes and tropes throughout a narrative involving many marginalized, and sometimes not athletically interested, characters. Crutcher's characters, however, are able to deal with the trauma because they have minds and bodies that grow in an atmosphere of personal and social respect engendered in team sports.

Just as sports has seen growth in cultural popularity, monetary value, and strategic advances, so too, has the world of YA sports literature. Crutcher, and authors like Robert Lipsyte and Bruce Brooks, can be considered literary game-changers in the genre of sports based YA fiction. It should not be surprising that Pamela S. Carroll and Steven B. Chandler remind readers that within that last two decades "young adult literature has become a staple for middle and high school classrooms" (Carroll and Chandler 35). Especially because the work of authors like

Chris Crutcher and Will Weaver, who have influenced the next generation of writers like Carl Deuker, adolescents, now more than ever, have access to quality YA sports based literature. This surge in popularity for Crutcher's fiction in some schools provides students with a relevant reading option that young athletes will especially find interesting. In *Whale Talk* and *Ironman,* Crutcher makes the case that adolescents should aim to be responsible for their own actions and impulses. However, it is important to recognize that questions remain about whether or not an adult author can create authentic adolescent voices their narratives.

Crutcher is aware of the theoretical problems confronting the creation of authentic narration, but he feels that the most important aspect of YA fiction is to convey realistic stories. The protagonist's story is written by an adult, but focused on both traditional and emerging trends in youth culture. Crutcher has "always contended that the only difference between adult literature and young adult literature should be the age of the protagonist" (Prince 72). This is the case in all of his YA fiction. However, for Crutcher, good YA fiction must have compelling stories not only about an adolescent protagonist, but around them. He claims, "I want to be remembered as a storyteller, and I want to tell stories that seem real so people will recognize something in their own lives and see the connections" (McDonnell 133). Therefore, his fiction relates to the human condition as well as situations appropriate to those readers the same age as his protagonists. Crutcher wants to do this, however, without sacrificing the authentically adolescent voice.

Thus, in Crutcher's various novels, particularly *Ironman* and *Whale Talk*, the adolescent protagonist's views dominate the narration, making the adolescent voice essential to the story. As Crowe states, "Sports play important roles in his novels because he has an interest and background in athletics, but, perhaps more importantly, sports helps him tell a stronger story" (Crowe 42). Crutcher wants to write a different kind of sports novel; in fact, he resists being

labeled as simply a sports novelist[4]. Crutcher says that protagonists who fit the heroic athletic stereotype were uninteresting to him as a writer: "A truth about humans is that we are a trial and error species, we learn from our mistakes—not just our physical mistakes, but our emotional and spiritual mistakes as well. I think true heroes aren't defined so much by what they do "right" as by how they respond to what they do "wrong" ("From Chip Hilton"4).[5] The most compelling part of Crutcher's novels is the way the characters respond to various forms of distress, many of them coming from traumatic past experiences, and use sports to transform themselves.

In Crutcher's novels, there is always at least one, if not many, characters who are suffering from trauma and need to find a way to cope with their past. Judith Herman's study of the effect of physical and emotional abuse maintains that the "first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor" (Herman 133). Whether it's the loss of a friend or a parent, Crutcher's characters empower themselves through physical activity. Not all of his novels have been based on real-life tragedies, but Crutcher's fiction as a whole indicates that athletics can help students become determined, introspective, and disciplined. The ultimate goal for the coach is to train his athletes to motivate themselves. Coaches and teachers, he believes, should aim to enable students and team members to become their own critics, teaching them the process required to achieve greatness in any sphere. Swimming (or basketball, or track, or football), therefore, becomes a model for life; once a person dives in, he is entirely responsible for his own performance. If the participants have properly trained and absorbed their coach's lessons, the coach becomes simply a proud spectator.

Many of Crutcher's coaches watch their pupils do incredible things, often becoming inspired to become better people themselves. Crutcher also uses coaches as both positive and negative figures within his fictional sporting communities. By having such varied depictions of

coaches, Crutcher establishes that there are both good and bad people in the sporting world, as in life. Terrible things and people can make their way onto teams; bullies exist, and sports often gives certain people unjustified entitlement. However, sports can also provide a chance to attack and defeat prejudices. In many interviews, Crutcher makes clear that being a part of a sports team does not necessarily make a person better, but it can enhance the quality of life for those taking part. Also, some students' limited academic ability makes it impractical for them to participate in the debate team or become school president, but many of them can participate in sports. Through athletics, teachers and coaches can argue that good performance and preparation are aspects of success on the playing field, in the classroom, and in life in general.

Crutcher's publishing history shows his progress toward achieving these goals. At first glance, for example, it seems odd that there is a six-year gap between the publication of *Ironman* and *Whale Talk.* Crutcher's publishing pace in the 1990s and 2000s was usually two years, which leads one to believe that during the six years between the novels Crutcher was further developing many of the concepts and themes found in *Ironman*. The difference between the two novels is the amount of emphasis placed on school's sponsored sports teams. Crutcher effectively creates a *de facto* team as a support system for his protagonist in his earlier novel; therefore, it seems logical that he could extend the level of intimacy and empathy between another diverse group of characters by placing them on what is clearly a more recognizable version of a team in *Whale Talk*. In both novels, the protagonists are a bit single-minded in his athletic activities until they experience a positive team environment.

Throughout his career, Crutcher's protagonists have been involved with various types and forms of sports. It was British aesthetician David Best who concluded that there are two kinds of sports "purposive and the aesthetic" (Umphlett 159). The first kind includes more traditional team sports like baseball, hockey, basketball, and football, where the goal for the

participants is to score the most points possible. The aesthetic sports are more strictly defined: dancing, figure skating, gymnastics, diving, and any other sport where "performance must be accompanied by an economy of effort and movement" (Umphlett 159). Crutcher's work deals predominantly with the first category, the purposive. Nevertheless, as a writer, Crutcher portrays individual and team sports with an emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of athletics. Crutcher's characters still display beauty through sports, as most of his protagonists are motivated to participate by more than simply a desire to win. His writing brings out the beauty found in an exacting stroke in the pool, for example, whether or not the person with said stroke wins or loses. The value of athletic participation for his characters is centered on their physical, emotional, and social development. Placing his characters on a team allows Crutcher to help his readers identify his characters not only emotionally but in a more visceral sense highlights the way sports grew in importance to the narrative in these two novels.

Chris Crutcher's *Ironman* and *Whale Talk* depict sports and athletics in two spheres: personal and social. This thesis aims to look at both elements in these two novels, *Whale Talk* did receive more critical praise and public attention, but the value of considering these two books in conjunction is found in the amount of growth seen in Crutcher's writing. *Ironman* is an examination of a character whose passion revolves around participation in athletics more than purely school sports, as the main character participates in a triathlon outside of school. *Whale Talk* is a useful text for examining the role sports plays in Crutcher's fiction, because the text is very specific about the negative effects of "jock" culture found in the lives of many adolescents. Pairing these two texts allows for a very broad look at not only sports, but also the ways being part of a team is a healthy experience for the adolescents.

The first section will be an examination of the pervasive role of sports in *Ironman*. It will focus on the ways in which sports provides Bo Brewster with an outlet for his anger and aggression towards people that do not understand him: teachers, parents, and other students. This chapter will also look at the ways Crutcher's characters form their own type of team from their anger management group, which supports the main character's goal to become an elite athlete. Ultimately, a group of friends encourage their peers' athletic pursuits, and help him maintain a more rational and productive outlook on life. The third chapter will concern itself with the personal benefits T.J. and his teammates gain from his activity in both private and school sanctioned sports in *Whale Talk*. Much of the focus in the *Whale Talk* chapter will be on the ways in which frustration, anger, and despair are mitigated by exercise. This chapter will examine the benefits of the social interaction that a team requires from all the members involved. Specifically, it will concentrate on the unity and camaraderie built over the course of the Cutter Mermen's season.

A final, fourth section will bring together all the matters previously considered, as well as resituating them within the context of the modern YA sports literature. Sports in both texts allow the protagonists to take care of every aspect of their being, which then allow them to socialize and make stronger friendships. The bonds Bo and T.J. form with their respective teammates lead to emotional connection and sense of community, an empathetic environment for adolescents. Crutcher's realistic depiction of adolescent life and the world of athletics imply that the benefits of sports for his protagonists could be achieved for many students across the United States. He accounts for the positives and negatives found in sports through his fiction and demonstrates practical positive uses of sporting outlets for modern adolescents.

Chapter II: *Ironman:* Creating a Support Team from a Support Group

Chris Crutcher's *Ironman* is based on the fictional letters of Beauregard Brewster to Larry King, in which Bo, as he is called by most everyone, explains to the famous broadcaster his journey becoming an incredible triathlete. Bo is "a swimming, bicycling, running lunatic, willing and able to cover great distances at high speeds while enduring extreme physical pain" (2). However, Bo's anger with the sporting community, specifically with some of the faculty who double as coaches, causes him to act out, resulting in in numerous suspensions. Since Coach Keith Redmond is both the head football coach and Bo's English teacher, conflicts on the field turn into verbal altercations in the classroom. One encounter with Coach Redmond becomes the tipping point, and Bo is ordered to attend the school's anger management group or he will be expelled.

The anger management group, dubbed Nak's Pack (for the name of its leader), is full of students with varying emotional issues. Over the course of the novel, Bo finds himself becoming more empathetic toward his peers in anger management, and by extension, toward the student body as a whole. Bo's anger with his own home life, his estranged father, and the school administration provide him with the motivation and energy to power his grueling workouts. Without this physical and emotional outlet, Bo would be unable to calm his mind and emotions enough to truly connect with others. Until Bo learns to talk about the frustration that motivates him to push his body to its limit, he cannot maximize his training and performance.

Outside of school, Bo spends most of his time training or attempting to curry the favor of the only female group member, Shelly. It is with her help, along with anger management itself that Bo is able to take on a challenge of proving he is one of the best tri-athletes at an *Ironman* competition called Yukon Jack's. Bo is not preparing for an ordinary triathlon, in which "participants spend twice as much time cycling as they do running or swimming" (3). Instead, at

Yukon Jack's E.W. Invitational Scabland, the swimming distance is doubled from that of a traditional triathlon; the winner is not simply a triathlete, but an *Ironman*. While Bo wants to beat the field, his father, Lucas Brewster, has arranged to help a competing team beat Bo in order to humble his son. With the help of his new team, however, Bo is able to push himself to perform to the best of his ability, despite the obstacles placed in front of him by his father.

Bo considers becoming the most famous triathlete as his ultimate purpose in life, and his identity is intertwined with his single-minded desire to succeed in athletics. When Bo asks teacher and coach Lionel Serbousek about possible topics for a journalism story, Mr. Serbousek advises him to take a "stotan angle" (96).[6] Bo comes to find out that a legendary track coach coined the terms as a reference to someone who has the traits of a stoic and a Spartan. This advice gives Bo a different perspective on what it means to be a superior athlete--someone with incredible physical and mental stamina, as well as the discipline to control his emotional responses. Bo understands that obtaining the status of an *Ironman* requires an incredible level of personal, physical and emotional commitment, but he still needs to learn that achieving a personal best becomes a lot more possible with the help of a team.

Bo may be small in stature, but he carries around a bravado that keeps others at a distance emotionally. He exhibits a condescending attitude toward those around him: "to reach the physical, spiritual, and emotional heights…I must also endure my regular life and the mortals" (4). At the start of the novel, it is fair to characterize Bo as a young man who resents having teammates because it puts his performance out of his control. In addition, Bo has given up playing team sports because he is tired of coaches who use public humiliation "as a motivator" (3). Bo played for the high school football team, but walked out on the team, thereby committing"cardinal sin" in Coach Redmond's eyes. After dropping a ball in practice, Redmond demands that he "declare his gender," implying that Bo's adolescent manhood is at stake based

on his performance on the football field. Beyond Crutcher's fiction, studies have shown that misinformed or negligent coaches and educators are to blame for the fact that "sports programs designed to foster positive youth development are in fact doing just the opposite" (FraserThomas, et al 26). Crutcher's fiction highlights many ways these negative factors affect modern adolescents and provides depictions of possible remedies for this misuse of athletics in society. Were Bo to continue to play for a coach he believes is disrespectful to his players, Fraser-Thomas' research suggests that he may have ended up with an attitude similar to Coach Redmond's.

As a result of his trials and training, Bo learns to be a bit more diplomatic in his dealings with Redmond, but the novel also suggests that an adolescent can vent some of the same emotions in healthier ways. Throughout the course of the novel, Bo will find it exhilarating and enjoyable to express some of his frustration more productively. In order to harness his thoughts, though, he must first learn to control his body:

> I focused my thoughts on this morning's confrontation with Redmond and pedaled hard into the long incline just past the city limits on the south side of town. As the incline steepened, I increased my rhythm, welcoming the burning in my thighs. I'm able to endure these monster workouts because I welcome the physical pain when struggles at school or home heat up. I understand physical pain; I can control it. (8)

This exact passage is found in two places in the novel, on the first page of the text and at the end of the novel. By setting this passage apart, Crutcher makes it clear that this may be the mission statement of *Ironman*. He positions Bo as a somewhat unbalanced adolescent, a young man who has a great capacity for enduring physical pain, but one who struggles to control his thoughts and actions when going through psychological pain. Upon opening the text, the first word the reader

finds is the Crutcher title for this passage: "Control." Such an opening indicates that a major theme of the novel is using sports to regulate one's mind, body, and emotions.

Despite his bravado, Bo is (perhaps not surprisingly) somewhat insecure. He claims that without Mr. Nak, he would be terrified of the other students. He reveals in a diary entry, "I can't tell you how much I'm afraid of looking bad. The loons I know in Anger Management aren't afraid of anything. Those guys will divide up my belongings if they see what I'm really like. Being uneasy in front of people makes me feel out of control" (38). Crutcher reminds the reader of the level of discomfort Bo feels when he is not in control of his surroundings. Bo hesitates to engage others on a substantive level because he already has an established (but false) view of the group of students present. Mr. Nak must be a source of protection for Bo until the young protagonist can truly express himself to his peers.

Bo needs to find a way to control both his body and mind, and therefore needs to find some form of psychophysical balance. As Matthew R. Weaver states, "Balance appears to be a recurring theme in Crutcher's life, and it shows in his writing" (Weaver 183). The narration also indicates that exercise allows Bo to push his body and mind to a point where he must release some of the toxic energy built out of anger and frustration with Coach Redmond and his father. The members of his anger management group also benefit from their participation in Bo's athletic pursuits. Thus the novel suggests that athletes are not the only parties able to realize the social and personal benefits received via connection with the sporting world; participation in sports allows one's friends and family members more positive interactions with a more balanced adolescent. When they are able to deal with their personal issues, Crutcher implies, adolescents become more positive members of their families and society, but it helps to have some guidance.

Mr. Nak is more than just purely a counselor or advisor; he is also a facilitator of conversation and emotional intimacy. In the sports arena he would be called a coach. A coach's role is to push his or her competitors to challenge their physical, emotional, and psychological limits, in order to help them to learn to push beyond their preconceived boundaries. Like any good coach, Mr. Nak challenges the group to push each other past their individual comfort level, while maintaining an ultimately positive atmosphere. The first task a coach must undertake is creating an environment where people can bare and work on their weaknesses in front of others without undue discomfort. In order to guide Bo, Mr. Nak must appeal to Bo's athletic or physical side, since that is often used to cope with emotional frustration. Like anyone, Bo's worldview is shaped by his past experiences, many of which have been in the athletic realm.

In his depiction of the members of the anger management group, Crutcher makes clear that creating empathy starts with individual connection. Adolescence is a period of uncomfortable but necessary growth. During this time, it makes sense to encourage young people to find others who not only support, but challenge them physically, emotionally, and socially. The members of the group do not need to have the same extra-curricular interests; but in an attempt to draw out their emotional frustration Mr. Nak cannot avoid parts of the students' lives that do not fall under school jurisdiction. A good counselor must first create connections within the group--only then--can the group ask an individual to open up.

Upon first meeting his anger management peers, Bo regards them as "thieves and murderers" (45). The articulate Bo is being purposefully hyperbolic here, in order to convey the level of emotional stress and division he feels entering his first session with Mr. Nak's group. One of Bo's first discoveries is that the group is actually very diverse. First, there is the counselor, Noboru Nakatani, a cowboy with a slight build and Japanese heritage. Mr. Nak's western drawl and authentic cowboy dress have a tendency to make him seem calm and

confident to the students. When Mr. Nak invites the group members to introduce themselves, Shuja is the first to do so. Shuja, the only African-American in the group, is "a big, strong, goodlooking kid with a wide-open face that looks like he never gets mad" (45). Next is Elvis, an archetypical troubled student who respects very few of his peers. Bo and the rest of the student body have been wary of Elvis for years because he "is one of those guys who started shaving in junior high school, and then started using the straight razor he shaved with to take everybody's lunch money" (46). Both Shuja and Elvis are examples of adolescents who could benefit from playing team sports, but they have extenuating life circumstances that prevent them from pursuing any athletic ambition.

Shuja has reason to be angry about the racial bigotry existing in the town and tolerated in the school. Elvis is a very capable young man, with charisma, intellectual ability, and natural athleticism, but poverty and domestic responsibilities do not allow him to take part in any activities after school. Next there is Hudge, a large sensitive young man whose abusive household has deprived him of any sense of self-assurance. When he feels uncomfortable, he repeats phrases he knows by memory as a coping mechanism. Then there is Joey, who Bo describes as "one of the few regular-looking guys in the group—nice clothes, dark. Kind of slicked-back hair would be pretty good-looking if you could ignore the permanent scowl on his face" (49). Rounding out the mainstays of Nak's Pak is the only female character, Shelly. Shelly's anger with her abusive father led to altercations on the basketball court, resulting her being cut from both the junior and senior varsity teams by Coach Redmond. For Bo and the rest of Nak's Pack, a mandatory activity transforms into a voluntary team around a coaching figure like Mr. Nak.

Roberta Trites contends that Mr. Nak's presence *in loco parentis* means that as the adult, he becomes the central figure of the therapy group, effectively giving him more power in

conversation and influence. Trites says that the ironic detachment seen in the narration takes power from the adolescents and gives it to adults. Trites maintains that Crutcher's fiction aims "to teach adolescents to quit being adolescents," and argues that placing Mr. Nak in an advisory role detracts from the power and agency of the adolescents he is counseling. (83) Trites raises an important point about the potential for an adult voice to become coercive, rendering the adolescent's voice inauthentic. However, to counter Trites, perhaps it would be fair to say that through sessions with Mr. Nak, the students are learning to become better adolescents, lessons which will also help them moving forward.

Closer examination of the numerous meetings of Nak's Pak reveals that students are doing the thinking, introspecting, and creating better reflective capabilities. Their conversations allow the students to be integral to each other's progression in the program. Without these personal admissions and revelations, there would be a lack of shared experience, which allows for a greater sense of empathy amongst the group members. Involvement in sports can also provide adolescents with such opportunities to expel their repressed emotional frustration with past abuse or neglect. Bo admits his greatest fear is feeling out of control in a public forum, so it eases his mind that as the adult, Mr. Nak is ultimately in control of the group dynamic.

As an athlete, Crutcher understands that team building occurs in defined spaces over long periods of time. In the modern business world, corporations often hire contractors to hold team building seminars, but they fail to achieve any real team unity because a weekend retreat or day session does not take advantage of the inherent benefits of prolonged team socialization. Nak's Pack meets twice every school day, which requires a rate of socialization similar to that of a traditional sports team. In the sporting community, this practice is called holding two-a-days, which are meant to test their physical and mental boundaries as well as foster a growing sense of camaraderie within the team. In his attempts to bring his adolescent characters together to deal

with their individual frustrations, Crutcher forms the anger management group in *Ironman* around many of the same principles found in his more directly team- sports- related novels.

During these two-a-day's, Mr. Nak helps Bo direct his attention to the reason he and his peers have landed in anger management. After a brief introduction to the group by one of the "inmates," Shuja, Nak surprises Bo by asking him "What are you pissed off about, Brewster?"(47). Crowe says that Crutcher often uses coaches in his novels to provide "advice that has more to do with becoming an adult than with becoming a better athlete, to the young players they work with" (Crowe 88). Bo denies that he is angry about anything in specific, and then he proceeds to tell the group that his participation in anger management is required because he used profanity towards a faculty member on multiple occasions. This immediately endears him to the entire group, which responds to his admission with applause. Their approval is short lived, but it is nevertheless a sign of hope that there is one thing this group has in common: a defensive attitude towards figures of authority. As a group of students finding a collective enemy in Coach Redmond will become even more important as they coalesce into a stronger unit.

In Jean Ann John's doctoral dissertation *Teaching Citizenship: The Civic Values in the Young Adult Novels of Chris Crutcher* (2003), John argues that the values central to the perpetuation of democracy in the United States are the same as those that create a healthy social order, especially in adolescents. In *Ironman*, Bo's peers, coach, and counselor encourage him to embrace the qualities of "honesty, compassion, tolerance, respect for the worth and dignity of the individual, and reflective decision-making" (78). In John's study, she tracks the number of instances these qualities are demonstrated by main and surrounding characters within Crutcher's various individual sports novels. The two most frequent categories displayed are "compassion

followed by reflective-decision making" (109). Both of these qualities are found in the group dynamic of what will eventually be the anger management team.

In order to help Bo improve his reflective-decision making, he first admits to the poor decisions he has made. Bo's actions account for all but one instance of reflective-decision making (110). Improvement in decision making skills necessitates introspection. As Bo learns of his future teammates' tribulations, he grows closer to them. He begins to see his peers as people with many of the same problems he has when it comes to dealing with anger. His anger is mostly with the school system and his psychologically abusive, and mostly absent father. When Elvis and Shuja claim that they would rather just use physical violence to combat people that mistreat them, Mr. Nak intervenes: "The more thirty-five pounders you coldcock, the madder you'll be, because no matter how many of em' you knock out, you're still the dumb one. The humiliated one. The out of control one" (60.) This response resonates with the group, especially with Bo. Bo admits "that doesn't seem like it should be right… but it sure felt right (60). He begins to reconsider his previous responses to similar situations, and he recognizes the role his emotions play in his decision making. From this Bo can recognize that controlling his emotions will not only contribute to better relationships, but also lead to better performance in-athletics. His developing relationship with Shelly, for example, is evidence that sports are a very important part of Bo's social relationships. Such relationships help move both the story of the protagonist and the overall narrative stronger. Crutcher's fiction generally revolves around a male protagonist, but that does not mean his female characters lack depth and complexity. The lack of obvious central female characters in Crutcher's fiction has led many critics to ignore their presence in his texts altogether.[7]

Susannah Sheffer has highlighted the significant roles female characters have played in Crutcher's fiction. However, her praise does not apply to *Ironman.* Perhaps this is because the strong female character in the novel, Shelly, finds not only kinship but also a romantic relationship with Bo. Sheffer comments that the female characters in Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs* and *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* "have been damaged is such complex ways that neither can be the girlfriend of the male characters through whom we meet them" (11). For some, Shelly's status as Bo's girlfriend may designate her as a secondary female character within Crutcher's fiction. However, unlike other girlfriend characters in Crutcher's novels, Shelly is not simply a love interest or friend; she is a teammate. In *Ironman,* one finds the creation of a team around Bo, but Shelly becomes the first trusted member of Bo's future team. She represents a bridge of trust that Bo needs in order to open himself up to trusting the other members of anger management who will help him pursue a personal goal. Out of a similar passion for athletics and a hatred for Coach Redmond, Bo finds in Shelly an intense bond. Before the actual formation of the angry management team, Shelly helps Bo train and prepare for the Yukon Jack's marathon, thereby becoming the first of Bo's future teammates.

Shelly's passion for athletic ambitions provides others a chance to make jokes about her physical prowess. Bo is aware that others negatively judge her pursuit of American Gladiator fame, but knows that the root of her desire (similar to his own) is a need to balance her mind and body. In his letters to Larry King, Bo describes himself as "a guy whose masculinity quotient hovers just under triple digits (who) is going out with a girl who can out bench-press him by twenty pounds and fears no man" (91). Bo relishes the differences between them as athletes and respects her as an equal. As a peer, Shelly's overt athleticism, if not superiority, indicates to Bo that she is a person who also finds tremendous pleasure in taking her workouts seriously.

Crutcher inverts the stereotypical gender roles of the "jock" and the doting "cheerleader girlfriend"

After one very contentious anger management group meeting, Mr. Nak speaks privately with Bo in order to remind him that as an athlete, he has been neglecting a loyalty to his supporters. Lionel Serbousek is the swimming coach at a local University and a journalism teacher at Bo's school. Bo decides to avoid Mr. Serbousek when the teacher confirms that he is a homosexual. Bo's mistreatment of Mr. Serbousek does not go unnoticed by Mr. Nak; who says "he's there to walk through any particular hell you wanna walk through, an 'you turn your back on him cause' he tells you the truth… I don't mind workin' with a man's anger, but I have a hard time workin' with a man who turns his back on his friends" (174). When Bo walked away from the football team it was justified, because he refused to be intimidated or humiliated by Coach Redmond. However, Mr. Serbousek lets Bo train with the local university's swim team he coaches as a sign of his trust and appreciation for Bo as an athlete and person. Bo must apologize for his judgmental attitude, as being a true athlete means respecting coaches, teammates, and competitors.

Mr. Nak advises Bo to acknowledge his unkind actions to Mr. Serbousek, which Bo interprets as though it were tactical sports advice. Because he has wronged Mr. Serbousek, he knows he must "go back to him like a stotan" (178). Bo applies lessons he learned in order to help him not only in athletic competition, but also in his daily life and relationships. As in other novels, Crutcher's *Ironman* contains coaches who "provide a similar kind of mentoring, wise advice that has more to do with becoming a better adult than with becoming a better athlete, to the young players they work with" (Crowe 88). Bo learns to care more about his relationships with others, but his frustration with his own humanity, his flaws and foibles, become motivating factors in his physical preparation for the Yukon Jack's Ironman competition.

From his relentless "stotan" training Bo learns about the power of training his body both physically and mentally. He says that "this kind of training feels almost spiritual" (187). Bo admits that there is often a severe level of pain which courses through his body during competition; the only way he can overcome that pain is by calling up "this power, and it feels like hate, and it feels like love, and I simply pull ahead" (187). That kind of mental and physical resilience draws fellow athletes like Bo and Shelly together. Bo admits that he pities "guys like Elvis, who'll never be jocks because they have the same picture of athletics that Redmond has, only Redmond loves them and Elvis hates them; for guys like Hudge, who are unaware they even have a body" (118). Bo begins to realize that he does have the privilege of having the time, inclination, and desire to enjoy the benefits of having athletics as a passion and pastime. Mr. Nak encourages and helps manage a positive atmosphere of dialogue between the students, but he does not serve as the initial stimulus behind the group rallying around Bo. It is the students who are learning from introspection and dialogue with others. Mr. Nak allows and entices the students to become more integral in their involvement with their peers.

As a coaching figure, Mr. Nak attempts to push the students to take initiative in life, similar to the extra effort taken by athletes during unsupervised individual skill practice. Studies have shown that one of the most important personal benefits acquired by adolescent athletes is an increase in psychophysical involvement with peer groups. Reed Larson, who has done extensive work in adolescent psychology, concludes, "The context best suited to the development of initiative appears to be that of structured voluntary activities, such as sports, arts, and participation in organizations, in which youths experience the rare combination of intrinsic motivation in combination with deep attention" (170). [8] Studies have shown that one of the most important personal benefits acquired by adolescent athletes is an increase in psychophysical involvement with peer groups.

At a crucial moment of the text, Shuja, one of the members of the group displays a capacity for both qualities. During one of anger management sessions, Shuja opens with a proposal for a group "project" (Crutcher 232). Mr. Nak inquires as to what this project would be, and Shuja responds: "I think we gotta get behind Ironman" (232). He continues as the group stares at him, "way I see it, Rock'n Roll right about Ironman. He different from us, but not for the reason Rock 'n' Roll think. Ironman different 'cause he can do somethin' about what ails him" (233). Instead of confirming or denying this statement, Mr. Nak simply responds, "Interstin' thought. Keep talkin'"(233). This exchange allows for Shuja to continue his line of thinking, reinforcing his own personal agency as a speaker. His digression depicts the many personal struggles the reader has come to identify with the major characters in anger management:

> take Hudge here. Cain't do nothin' bout' what's goin on in his life but get some miles between him an it'. Rock 'n ' Roll stuck takin care of his family: Daddy's split, little brother and sister hammerin' at him all the time, got to keep a full-time job keepin' his head above water. Wonder Woman done los' her childhood, if ya wanna know. Got it robbed right from her. All kinda different foster parents an' shit; John Wayne Redmond cheatin' her outta her rightful high-school glory, an' who knows what all else. Resta these guys, who knows what boogeymen after them, they never speak up. Me, I got all of history to take on; no way I can fix that 'fore the end-of-the-year picnic…But, Ironman, he know the enemy. He got Tweedledumb an' Tweedledumber for a daddy an' a coach, an' a buncha smartass college boys with a bad attitude an' a rocket bicycle his own daddy give' em to help 'em kick his boy's ass. I think it might help this group manage a whole buncha anger to see at least one enemy get—(233-234)

In listing his group mates, Shuja provides nicknames, illustrating his personal interest in their individual character. Elvis has a bit of a rebel edge; Shelly is truly an incredible young athlete with dreams that have been shattered by members of the coaching community; Hudge suffers from circumstances he seems to constantly struggle to understand; and Shuja is a minority; but together they can do something for Bo, for the "Ironman." The length of this speech helps to build a collective frustration in his listeners regarding the personal strife they experience. Showing true inclusivity, he even acknowledges some of the more transient members of the group, expressing his desire to know their struggles should they decide to open up Shuja's attitude towards his peers is sympathetic and inclusive, which embodies the spirit of all healthy teams in Crutcher's fiction. Elvis quickly balks at this suggestion, but Shuja explains that their role is to a "support team" (234). While there is the modifier "support" applied to this proposed group; it is important to note it is the first time anyone has proposed that Bo become a part of a "team."

In addition to Shuja's kind proposal, Bo can take advantage of the support of other's which Mr. Serbousek earlier said would be necessary for Bo to achieve greatness in competition. Until he brings in others to help, Bo's athletic focus revolves solely around developing the stoic part of his nature. But, in doing so, he only heads half of Mr. Serbousek's message. The Spartans were famed for their ability in battle, not only as individual soldiers, but as units within an army. By working in cooperation with others, Bo can achieve more as a person. Mr. Serbousek tells Bo that he needs to "find other stotans," but, perhaps, they find him:

Then I'm biking over the back roads towards Spangle, and Elvis pulls up beside me in his old man's pickup, paces me for almost twenty miles. Hudgie's in the back, holding up a handmade sign that says KICK BUTT FOR ANGRY MANAGEMENT. Mr. Nak said anyone who participates in this madness need to come to group only once a week, so I've got guys I

barely know driving up beside me in the middle of eastern Washington scabland, handing me Gatorade and peeling me bananas. It's hard to say how good it feels to have these lunatics behind me, and harder to say how scared I am to let them down. (236-237) Mr. Nak lets the students substitute time in anger management in order to be a part of a collective team surrounding Bo. Not only is Bo interacting with Shelly, Hudgie, and the rest of the regulars in anger management, but also with some of the students who are new to the group. This moral, physical, and even nutritional support helps Bo train and prepare for a competition in the future. Elvis, who initially questioned the Shuja's proposition to support Bo, lends his teammate support in the weight room as well. Team members do not simply challenge and support each other in the actual event, but they also practice together to prepare themselves physically and mentally.

Importantly, the group members attend the Yukon Jack's Triathlon with Bo, and from the time they enter the parking lot, they begin acting like a team. The team members ride together with Mr. Seroubsek in the "angry management caravan," a term created by Hudgie. In addition to traveling in support, they give Bo an overdubbed mix of music for motivation, but they also sew a pair of headphones into a hat, with the word "Stotan" embroidered into the front. Shuja tells him that they even made sure the hat fit under Bo's helmet and would serve the practical purpose of shading his head and line of sight. The consideration Shelley and the others show is not lost on Bo; the narration indicates that he thinks "they made me a tape…Is that great or what?" (250). Not only does the group provide Bo with moral support, but they give him a strategic advantage.

During the opening ceremony for the race, Hudgie manages to spray paint an orange streak on the back of Wyrack's team's jerseys; they have three college swimmers and the financial backing of Bo's father. This was all planned, as later Bo would hear on the tape to "keep your eye on the orange" (260). Wyrack notices Hudgie tampering with his gear and

becomes agitated, but Elvis intervenes. At the beginning of the novel, Elvis is elusive and apathetic towards his peers, but at Yukon Jack's he takes responsibility for Hudgie, telling Wyrack, "He's my brother…I'm sorry, man, really sorry. I'll pay for the shirt" (257). Hudgie, a young man who is easily upset risks, angering a college athlete. Elvis is someone who does not like to apologize for anything, but he does so to save Hudgie and help Bo. They have overcome some of their fears in order to help a fellow peer in athletic competition. The deceit and betrayal by Bo's father and Keith Redmond make Bo more appreciative of the loyalty given by his anger management comrades.

In the mix tape Bo's teammates makes for him, they consider his needs as an athlete, choosing music that will help him pace himself for an ultimate first place-finish. Teams consider the need of the individual best by utilizing the power of the social and communal. As Bo begins the race he is so focused he forgets to start the tape, but his anger management cohorts expected Bo's focus on the race to be so complete that other things, like starting the tape, would be neglected for a brief period of time. As the tape begins, Bo hears Shuja's voice telling him that he's been "researchin this cyclin' game a bit" (259). Shuja starts Bo's trek off with three hip-hop songs, which are at the same beats-per-minute ration as Bo needs revolutions per minute to stay competitive: eighty. Through his research of the sport of cycling, Shuja exhibits a real desire to help Bo, which is not lost on the protagonist.

Creating empathy within the group is a tough task for both Mr. Nak and the students, but through forgiveness and open dialogue, a bond is formed that highlights the best support system there is: other people. Even within the context of competing in an incredibly difficult athletic event, Bo cannot help but think about his peers in anger management:

> Bo pictures his friends, his fellow Stotans, and the members of Nak's Pack running with him: The truth is, their lives will go on ---pretty much unchanged—

> whether he wins or not. He could give in to this evil vacuum sucking his life out, and time will march on. But then there's Hudge. What must it mean to Hudge to participate in this? To belong, to have a hand in someone striking a blow for him? Each time his voice comes over the headset, there is a childlike, barely contained giddiness. How many times in Hudge's life will he have a chance to walk the edge of something this powerful? (268)

In this passage, Crutcher draws out the protagonist's empathy through the young man's thoughts. It is evident that Bo's motivation to achieve his personal best stems from his consideration of other's, namely, Hudgie's feelings. Bo exhibits his desire to do something positive on his teammate's behalf. As Terry Davis writes, "Crutcher's stories are a way of striking a blow" for the disenfranchised (Davis 113). Realistically, one could argue that Bo's passion for athletics would have resulted in his participation in this race with or without Nak's Pack. However, the energy, encouragement, and support he gets from his crew provide him to be far more successful than he would have been on his own.

As in many of Crutcher's works, the actual place or position of his protagonist related to competition is of minor consequence. In the epilogue, Bo tells Larry King: "I kicked that Wyrack guy's butt, finished well above the middle of the pack. I caught a glimpse of Hudge's fluorescent orange stripe down the back of his suit…and just swam him down"(271). Despite his status as someone finishing in the middle of the competition, Bo can certainly be considered a winner because he beat many other teams who had three separate members, each competing in only one part of the triathlon. Not only did he beat the team his father and Coach Redmond set up to beat him, but also he has gained much more than bragging rights. Since Bo began preparing for the

Yukon Jack's event, he has gained a girlfriend, friends, mentors, and teammates. For Crutcher, his protagonist's victories are the result of enjoying the process and giving one's best effort.

At the beginning of *Ironman,* Bo did not really know any of these people who have come out to support his efforts at Yukon Jack's. Over the course of the novel, the members of anger management form a team based on the relationships they have developed as part of a required activity. As part of their support for Bo, the team is required to socialize, which forces them to be active. Bo's presence in anger management was the circumstantial result of misbehavior, which stemmed from personal anger and frustration. As an individual, Bo learns to value athleticism as being tied to mental stability. The support, advantages, and considerations Bo's team gives him, reassure the insecure protagonist that he is competing for a cause much larger than his own. Because of their support, involvement, and concern for a competition that matters to Bo immensely, Bo drastically alters his attitude toward his "teammates". In his eyes this group has gone from an entity he dismissed as an amalgamation of future criminals to a voluntary organization he is proud to represent. Such a transition indicates a tremendous level of socialization, empathy, and individual consideration as a result of the group's independent formation of a team structure.

For example, Crutcher's portrayal of Elvis implies that the troubled young man will mostly likely show the same level of interest in athletics that one finds in Bo and Shelly's characters, but he has come a long way from his previous disdain for anyone he perceived to be part of the jock community. His adversarial attitude towards Bo softens as he begins to identify with another's problems. In fact, it is Elvis who first informs Bo that Lucas Brewster has stacked the odds against Bo at Yukon Jack's. Hudgie also benefits from his active participation on the anger management team, overcoming the stutter which prevented him from communicating more readily with his peers. Shuja, the originator of the plan to help Bo, gains satisfaction from his

ability to help a peer achieve a goal. Due to his need to seem intimidating and aloof, Elvis is reluctant to care about, or at the very least, seem like he cares about anyone but himself and his own family. Yet he helps Bo in the weight room and on the road, thereby, opening himself up to others, which may lead those people to support him in his future endeavors. Shelly gains a confidant, training partner, and boyfriend, but more importantly she finds a friend who understands the positive power of channeling aggression through athletics. All of the students in the anger management group gain social, emotional, and physical coping mechanisms through their time in Nak's Pack.

However, it is the leader of the group, Mr. Nak, who seems most affected by the outpouring of support the group gives Bo. At the end of the novel he admits,

> I'm goin' back to Texas. They got a senior rodeo circuit down there I can join up with. I'm goin' because of what I saw at Yukon Jack's. I been payin' less attention to the physical world than I should, getting' outta contact. When I saw young Brewster here workin' his way through that hellish event, it got me rememberin' what it was like to be on a bareback bronc, how it felt to know exactly where that thunderous devil was goin' next, just from the tension in his muscle against my knee…I want wanna thank you folks for teachin' me that. I owe ya, an' I'll stay on a bronc one second longer in each of your names. (278)

The group has not inspired him to seek fame as a cowboy, those years are behind him, but he still realizes he must return to a community of fellow athletes and an activity which he knows he enjoys. His admission of personal inspiration further indicates that both adolescents and adults must not neglect the emotional, communal, or physical parts of their lives.

The world Crutcher creates in his fiction reflects his own life. In an interview he was once asked: "Do you ever get discouraged or burned out?" (Carter 45). His reply contained a quote from *Ironman*: "If you want to see how something works, look at it broke" (Crutcher 145). As an athlete, writer, and therapist, Crutcher knows that the process of living necessitates failure. Instead of protecting adolescents from situations which prevent any chance of disappointment, adults should encourage them to take the necessary chances to fail, learn, and respond to adversity. Every student sent to anger management in the novel already has a burden to bear. Protecting them would most certainly not involve sitting them in a room with other teenagers. However, as they learn that life has a greater share of misery of a more global scale, they begin to see the value in coming together to deal with life's difficulties. Mr. Nak helps encourage them to take the initiative to realize that they, the members themselves, are each tools they can use modify their circumstances. They cannot fix Bo's relationship with his dad, but they do something much more powerful: they help a young man achieve a dream. Many of the members may go on to continue their associations, but given the age of the characters many of them will be leaving high school for college or a job. However, all of have learned that they will benefit them from collaboration, acceptance, and team work. Each of them will carry with them the lessons they learned from being a part of a group that will always be theirs: Nak's Pack.

Chapter 3: *Whale Talk*: Making a Team from Unlikely Sources

The initial inspiration for Crutcher's *Whale* Talk was the real life story of a bullied young man held his classmates hostage. Over time the story evolved into one where the bullied are not the antagonists, but members of a group who support each other. The final product, *Whale Talk* is the story of Tao (T.J.) Jones and the team that forms around him. After two years of childhood neglect, T.J., is adopted. T.J. grows up showing both academic and athletic potential, but (like Bo) has trouble controlling his anger. A situation arises where the school is close to gaining the overall point state championship title, which means bragging rights for the athletics program, and more importantly, more funding for the school. In order to gain an advantage in the standings, they decide to ask Coach Simet to enlist members for a swim team, since not many schools have them in Idaho. As a result, T.J. seeks out as many potential members as possible, regardless of their athletic experience.

Between Simet's proposal that T.J. help start a team and T.J.'s consent to join the swim team, he witnesses bullying athlete Mike Barbour harassing special education student Chris Coughlin over wearing his brother's letterman's jackets. Chris's brother was a star athlete at Cutter high school who was drafted into the major leagues, but he died in a rock-climbing accident. Until then, he made sure no one picked on Chris for being mentally challenged. Barbour demands that Chris not wear his brother's jacket, because "nobody wears a letter jacket but the guy who earns it" (37). Barbour tells T.J. that if he catches Chris wearing his brother's jacket again, he will take it from him and burn it.

T.J. is an athlete first, and a young man interested in team sports second. He admits: "I love athletics. When I'm gliding to the hoop in a pick-up game, or gunning some guy down from center field in a summer vacant-lot game, or falling into a perfect pace five miles out on a run, I feel downright godlike. But those things I do on my own." (17). T.J. is diverse in his athletic

pursuits. T.J.'s athletic ability, physique, and passion for his pursuits have led coaches to try to get him "to turn out for sports since junior high" (11). He says that when he denies their entreaties, they "accuse me of lacking the high school equivalent of patriotism, even to the point of calling me a traitor" (11). The venom with which this statement is delivered only further speaks to the difference between sports and athletics.

The novel suggests that coaches such as Coach Benson should feel gratified that a group of students are drawing real social and personal benefits from their athletic pursuits, which makes them more balanced students. While Benson argues that these students are doing nothing for the school, the novel shows that they are conducting themselves in a fashion which sets a positive example for their peers. Instead of supporting the young men, Coach Benson goes out of his way to frustrate their efforts, fueling the young men to further defy his stance against them. T.J. disagrees with the way athletes are given preferential treatment when it comes to academics, disciplinary issues, and funding. He claims that the letter jacket for Cutter High School "is worth a whole bunch of second chances in the front office, of which I'm still waiting for my first" (18). Crutcher fiction depicts the many ways those who participate in athletics feel a sense of superiority within many high schools around the country. Neil D. Isaacs wrote on the value of sports culture as a provocation for thinking in American culture in his book *Jock Culture U.S.A.* The administration and surrounding sports infrastructure in Cutter indicates that the town seems to be what Isaacs calls a "jockocracy" (17). Isaacs states, "In an irony of monumental proportions, the American institution that is on of the chief benefactors of the jockocracy is also one of the chief victims—the educational system" (158). With both financial and administrative emphasis placed on sports, those who are not already an established part of the athletics program are excluded from the school's focus on building a supportive environment for students of all interests. By encouraging Mike Barbour and Rich Marshall's exclusive view of the role of sports

for his high school, Coach Benson rewards bullying and jock superiority. This prevents any nontraditional athletes from wanting to participate in sports until T.J. becomes involved.

In *Whale Talk,* Crutcher accomplishes his goal of bringing together characters with different but equally challenging lives. T.J.'s pride in his amalgamation of the high school outcasts and loners is clear in this comment: "never in the history of Cutter High School has a team of this diversity been assembled" (65). The first response to T.J.'s ad looking for swimmers is Daniel Hole, an irrepressible stickler for exactness in language. His motivation is mainly to add more variety to the activities part of his college transcript. Then there is Simon DeLong who is three hundred pounds, this makes him an odd choice to recruit. Crutcher adds to the group a young man named Jackie Craig, who is "nondescript. Medium build, brown hair, about five-ten; the kind of guy who would get away with robbing a 7-11because even if they caught him on camera, no characteristic would stand out" (65). In Jackie, Crutcher extends a nod to the kids that feel marginalized in high school culture. From the first day at the pool, there is a new label that will apply to every member of the team: swimmer. Andy Mott also joins the team, which is a brave action, considering no one knows that he has an amputated leg until he strips at the pool. T.J. says that he never knows "what Mott is thinking whether he's simply ornery—the natural state of him---or if he's plotting a mass murder (89). The general feeling of Andy Mott's peers is that he is a loose cannon and should not be trusted. Often, as Andy's case shows, the best psychological and medical service is not available to many adolescents, which makes their participation is healthy activities even more important.

While T.J.'s initial intention for the team was to upset the status quo, he quickly learns that the genuine kinship and affection he finds in his teammates, especially Chris Coughlin, are the true prizes. Jean Ann John claims that teaching Crutcher's novels in a high school setting helps teach, elucidate, and promote the values of honesty, compassion, tolerance, respect for the

worth and dignity of the individual, and reflective decision making.[9] She breaks down all of these components by the frequency with which they occur in the text.[10] According to her, the civic value most pervasive in *Whale Talk* is compassion. This assertion makes sense given the importance of creating empathy as part of building a team. Another positive civic value that runs through the text is mutual respect, which is most often seen in T.J.'s actions. John says that "each member of the swim team is considered a misfit or an outsider in some way, the emphasis on Respect for the Worth and Dignity of Individuals is appropriate" (114). At the beginning of the novel, T.J. does appear empathetic toward Chris; but his concern is based only the bullying he has seen. As the story continues, readers see T.J.'s first real attempt at putting himself in Chris's position: "if I'm Chris Coughlin, a good day is when nobody calls me dummy and the football players don't jack me up, and somebody puts their hand on my shoulder and smiles at me when they see me staring at my dead brother's picture in the trophy case" (Crutcher 56). This admission illustrates T.J.'s desire to help create a positive team experience for Chris one that fulfills him, physically, psychologically, and socially.

The team, and in particular T.J., gain a positive role model in Coach Simet and learn the importance of a strong work ethic. As the novel progresses, T.J. begins to see passion in sports as integral to his best work in every area of life: "a good day is when I lock onto whatever I'm passionate about and pursue it with abandon, whether it's swimming, or messing with Mike Barbour's head, or a good journalism story, or Carly Hudson" (77). All of the activities listed are positive and productive, with the exception of the feud with Mike Barbour. However, the animosity between these two young men creates a space for change, enabling Crutcher to make a larger point about the differences of opinions as the pertain to society's conception of the role athletics should play in the lives of adolescents.

Under the instruction of Coach Simet, T.J. becomes a serious pupil in the art of swimming, taking advice and criticism with a positive attitude. At the beginning of the season, T.J. discovers a man named Oliver Van Zandt, living at the fitness center, in order to save money so his two fast-food jobs can pay for his son's college tuition. Instead of regarding him as a homeless interloper, T.J. accepts his offer to help the boys train, and he becomes another positive role-model. His presence is not only helpful, but necessary for the boys to be able to gain as much practice as possible. Coach Icko's (as he comes to be known) presence in the novel shows the power of inclusiveness as something that transcends being a participant on a team. Coach Icko's name derives from the title he is given by the boys, "Interim Coach Oliver" (104). T.J. justifies Coach Icko's place on the team with the assertion "he's a master motivator and is a better influence the more screwed up the athlete is" (104). Icko's past as an athlete helps him understand the most basic principles of training, such as hard work, conditioning, and focus. His ideas to rotate stations, play music, and rig a dry-land swimming simulator are all integral parts of the practices held. T.J. says that Coach Icko's voice and his constant yelling help break up the tedium of long workouts.

Coach Icko and Coach Simet agree on training methods, despite coming from two different athletic backgrounds. Their partnership provides evidence that there is not much difference between the techniques that are most effective for athletes, whether they are part of a team or just exercising for their health. At the start of their training, the boys are a team, but are not technically tied to the school in any way. Rather, they are a team united by a voluntary commitment to an unsponsored entity, which is both social and organized. Simet's status as a part of the school system actually prevents him from being able to coach until a certain date. The

same strategies Coach Icko and Coach Simet use to create the most growth both physically and mentally can be applied to problem solving in daily life.

After one confrontation between Rich Marshall and T.J., the young protagonist uses his anger to fuel his workout. T.J. says that he works on his endurance till he "can barely drag the paddles through the water, forcing my elbows high through each stroke, sending deep burning pain into my shoulders and chest, trying to replace the fear and contempt in my gut" (109). He begins to think that "this is Rich Marshall's purpose in my life, to make me faster" (109). In this instance, Crutcher informs the reader that T.J., like Bo before him, is aware that he is using exercise as a way to vent frustration and anger in a positive direction. Dosh and Royalty claim "As the book progresses, T.J. increasingly demonstrates an ability to overcome his initial impulses to act out violently in his anger" (130-131). The description of T.J.'s pain reveals the amount of work and sacrifice he puts into not only sports, but also in his private athletic training. T.J. also creates a team which will provide the same positive outlet for their anger. By becoming a school sponsored swimmer, T.J. has a more concrete form of athletics to channel his frustrations. As his anger management skills increase, he finds himself even more able to empathize with those around him.

The characters in *Whale Talk* bond over a similar cause, despite their different reasons for enjoying their training. T.J. says that Dan Hole enjoys the in-depth knowledge Coach Simet brings to practice, because "he is first and foremost a student, and the very physics of swimming fascinates him (118). Dan Hole sees swimming as both an intellectual and physical pursuit. Crutcher does this deliberately. He has stated that the best thing about sports is that it focuses the mind. Crutcher claims that "When you are moving, you are thinking" ("Ask Chris Crutcher"). He feels that the physical fitness coaches in schools around America should see themselves as educators first and foremost. As they discovered in their study, "Understanding Participation in

Sport and Physical Activity among Children and Adults: A Review of Qualitative Studies," Steven Allender, Gill Cowburn and Charlie Foster found that "Fun, enjoyment and social support for aspects of identity were reported more often as predictors of participation and nonparticipation than perceived health benefits" (832). Chris Coughlin may not even be able to understand the science that underlies the health benefits he receives from his swimming, but that does not matter for Chris, who finds swimming intoxicatingly enjoyable. He also gains confidence in his own ability as T.J. notes: "We are not prepared for Chris's response to crowds. He's been gathering confidence every time he touches the wall and sees his time is faster than the last, which, by the way speaks to his ability to learn , because he knows the second he sees it" (220). For Crutcher, it does not matter that Dan Hole enjoys the physics and science of swimming or that Chris Coughlin enjoys the physical nature of the activity.

The life skills these young men gain from their time as a swim team will benefit them beyond their adolescent years. A comprehensive study by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine found that "the quality of the coaching climate is an important predictor of the developmental benefits of sport participation and that one pathway by which the coaching climate has its effect on initiative and identity reflection is through developing youth selfperception" (Coatsworth and Conroy 320). T.J.'s choice to align himself with coaches Simet and Icko is a statement of their personal quality as role models and teachers. Simet's initial deal with the administration is that every member of the team who had progressively better times in competition, no exceptions, will receive a letter jacket. Christiane Trottier and Sophie Robitaille conducted a study to determine the roles of coaches in both high school and community sponsored athletics. Their study included 12 High School basketball coaches and 12 community swim coaches. In both cases, they found that the coaches aimed to teach 13 of the same "life skills, "such as self-confidence, stress and emotional management, respect, surpassing

oneself, leadership, accountability, autonomy, healthy lifestyle, concentration, goal setting, perseverance, punctuality, and visualization" (14). One of the basketball coaches in the study feels that goal setting helps create an environment where the athletes strive to achieve on both a daily and long term basis. At the start of each season he sets "a seasonal goal for the team that is challenging but realistic" (15). Coach Simet uses the same strategy with each of his swimmers, having them all strive to improve their times with each successive swim meet. Achieving such a lofty goal forces the athletes to be accountable to themselves and the team for their effort in practice and competition.

A coach's role is to intertwine the lessons of the physical with the mental. Trottier and Robitaille found through their research that coaches make sure their athletes also respond to "spontaneous and improvised situations" (16). As one of the coach's states "Everything (is) about the ability to manage stress and emotions…I regularly draw parallels between stress management when athletes have to write exams, because this is what they worry about most" (16). Coaches Simet and Icko know the inherent connection between physical and mental health. Trottier and Robitaille conclude "the overall results indicate that all the coaches emphasized the development of life skills in adolescent athletes, and were motivated to foster various teaching and transfer strategies… The most often reported life skills strategies taught (i.e., self-confidence and respect) are in line with literature" (17). On both teams in the study, the athletes learned to adapt the lessons learned in the classroom and sporting arena in a synchronous fashion. Thus, this scientific evidence confirms many of the claims found in Crutcher's fiction regarding the value of sports.

It is important to remember that the team members in *Whale Talk* live very different lives and come from almost all the high school social roles. T.J. sums up the visible stereotypes that make up his new team: "I believed the Magnificent Seven consisted of one swimmer of color, a

representative from each extreme of the educational spectrum, a muscle man, a giant, a chameleon… and a one legged-psychopath" (117). Part of building a team is encouraging the athletes to settle problems and disputes with their teammates in a respectful fashion. Before his time on the team, Mott has the same estranged relationship with his future teammates that he has with the rest of the student body. T.J.'s loyalty to his teammates must endure both external and internal scrutiny. It is much easier to unite behind a common enemy like Mike Barbour, who considers every member of Cutter's swim team to be equally inferior to the football team. A true camaraderie requires all parties to set personal issues aside for the good of the team, but that does not mean that such issues do not arise. Every person in any organization, be it sports, a work place, or a social group, is prone to question the overall purpose of the group in which he is participating. However, in *Whale Talk*, the members of the team put aside all their differences in order to support the others' attempts to compete at their personal best.

In one incident there is a literal breakdown of the team bus symbolizing an upcoming breakdown in communication, which will ultimately lead to resolution…Mott asks T.J. if he would rather be any one of his teammates, calling Chris a "dummy," pointing out Simon's race, and simply gives up on finding an injurious title for Jackie. Coach Simet demands that Mott quit the hurtful line of inquisitions, but he persists. He asks T.J. a question that the reader must notice as essential to the text: "Isn't that why you want us around… Give you the edge on superiority" (147). T.J. becomes enraged, but Simet demands that he keep his cool. Once again, Simet, a positive role model, intervenes, leading to T.J. to an epiphany: "Maybe it's because he's partly right. I did go looking for guys who were out there a ways. Up until now, I thought it was pretty clever. Maybe I'm being an arrogant asshole" (148). Being trapped on a bus with his team forces T.J. to take a look at his reasons for being a part of the team. Mott apologizes to him for

trying to get under his skin, admitting that he has a "personality disorder"(148). Mott then explains that his anger with others comes from the trauma he received after begin sexually abused by one of his mother's boyfriends. This admission strikes T.J. as remarkably brave. Ultimately, both boys want to find acceptance, even if their initial pride prevented them from making such a realization. Elizabeth Daniels and Campbell Leaper conducted a study to determine the benefits adolescents receive from athletic participation. They found that "given the increased need for belongingness during adolescence, we proposed that peer acceptance would mediate the association between sport participation and self-esteem" (875). T.J. and Mott come to an understanding that they must accept each other's personal qualities as a part of participation on a team. T.J. comes to the conclusion that he cannot fathom how many of them deal with their individual challenges.

This unlikely combination of social stereotypes serves to highlight the incredible level of socialization between parties, who previously would not have been near as eager to engage in conversation and supportive interaction. Paul J. C. Adachi and Teena Willoughby's "It's Not How Much You Play, but How Much You Enjoy the Game: The Longitudinal Associations between Adolescents' Self-Esteem and the Frequency Versus Enjoyment of Involvement in Sports," concluded that "In terms of socialization effects, the current findings suggest that the degree to which adolescents enjoy sports may be more important for increasing self-esteem than the frequency of their involvement in sports" (144).[11] Even if the members of the Cutter Swim team choose to take a part in other activities after the season, the self-confidence developed from their athletic experience will positively contribute to any relationships they form in social capacity.

The relationships formed are tested by the school's administration, the athletic council, and by the members of the team themselves. In order to become a true team it is imperative that the members empathize with their peers. On one bus ride, for example, T.J. reveals that the team is becoming close due to the fraternity developing on the small space of the bus:

> What I like about the meets more than the swimming, though is the bus ride. When Icko pulls the door shut and fires up the engine, it feels almost cocoon like. We talk about things we'd probably never mention in any other arena: Simon's mother drinks like a fish, Mott spent most of middle-school in drug rehab, TayRoy lost a baby brother to SIDS, Dan Hole's father has heart trouble, Chris's aunt plays bingo, and Jackie Craig may or may not have a voice box. Simet and Icko let us talk, feeding questions once in a while to keep the conversation going, but never intruding. (160)

By describing the bus environment as "cocoon like," T.J. indicates a sense of security and intimacy. The term also reflects the various team members' current life situations. These young men are not totally left to their own devices because they have coaches to guide and mentor them, but the growth process is not always pleasant. The subjects discussed on bus rides range from the extremely serious to the oddly mundane. T.J. absorbs and will remember many of the things he learns about his teammates, creating memories and friendships simultaneously. Both coaches attempt to fuel the boys' communication, prompting and prodding, "but never intruding" (160). In a practical sense, a team that communicates well will perform better, but that is not all Simet and Icko want to achieve through the guidance they provide for these young men. They not only want the team to work hard, but also to learn how to get along with others outside the team.

Throughout the season all of the members of the team have progressively improved not only in their skill, but also their times in organized high-school swim meets. Therefore, despite the fact that T.J. is the only member who qualifies for the State championship meet, each member has met the previous requirement for a letter jacket. After T.J. wins the Fifty and Hundred meter titles, an incredible accomplishment, he receives a call from Coach Benson. Benson tells them that if T.J. does not win his next race, giving the school the necessary points for an All-Sport State championship, that he will make sure that none of T.J.'s teammates will receive letter jackets. T.J. decides intentionally to place fourth, not giving into the unfair demands and bribery, making himself the only member of the team who did not have consistently better results with each race, the original letter requirements. In contrast to Bo, T.J. has to nobly lose to stand up for his teammates. T.J. acts in solidarity, without purposefully disrespecting himself, his opponents, or his team. He gives his very best for 200 meters and pulls back to look as though he just lost the edge. He is too proud of his team to let their purpose, and ultimately his, be involved with bribery and condescension.

At an athletic council meeting, student representative Mike Barbour challenges Chris Coughlin to a contest that stipulates that the Cutter Swim team will not receive letter jackets should Mike Barbour win an endurance contest in the water, but should Chris win, the requirements return to the original ones, meaning everyone but T.J. would get a jacket. T.J. notices that Chris is focusing on the joy he receives from the physical act of swimming, instead of focusing on beating his opponent. After Barbour has quit the endurance contest, T.J. notes "It's all we can do to get Chris to stop. He's into this swimming thing" (Crutcher 274). His participation in swimming is important because it illustrates the point that "since it is the low self-esteem child who is probably in greatest need of a positive athletic experience and who

appears to respond most favorably to desirable coaching practices and most unfavorably to negative practices" (Smith, Smoll, Curtis 73). Chris, an academically challenged child, learns through swimming to focus, concentrate, and enjoy being pushed physically and mentally.

In their article "Improving Socialization Through Sport: An Analytic Review of Literature on Aggression and Sportsmanship," Christine Nucci and Kim Young-Shim further the arguments made by the novel saying that "sports provide a microcosm for living and society" (123). Their study aims to discover ways in which athletes can best control their aggression, while displaying good sportsmanship. They recommend several things which the athletic community could do to bring about healthy conduct on and off the field:

> First, coaches, teachers, and parents should serve as positive role models of moral reasoning and sportsmanship and provide playful and healthy environments for young athletes. Second, the rules and structure of sports should be modified to satisfy each young athlete's developmental needs and growth. Third, media and referees should encourage, facilitate, and highlight sportsmanlike behaviors. Fourth, young athletes must be encouraged to join in the classes of academe with the same enthusiasm as competitive sports…Finally, we need to help each athlete develop more advanced levels of moral reasoning as well as sport-related strategies and skills in the educational system. (127)

In *Whale Talk,* the reader finds every one of these recommendations conducive to fostering a stronger sense of empathy and socialization. Coaches Simet and Icko encourage their athletes to treat themselves, their team, and the competition with respect. Also, during bus rides, Coach Simet takes time to go over every member's academic progress, reminding those who need it that to stay eligible for swimming requires them to hold passing grades in all their classes.

The bus serves not only as a social environment, but also as a *de facto* tutoring area. Coach Simet gives Dan Hole the responsibility of making "certain that, for the first time in his life, Andy Mott passes all his classes with a C" (163). All of the extra academic work pays off when the team achieves "the second –highest cumulative grade-point average of any winter athletic team" (164). All of this leads to socialized enjoyment as the narration informs: "But the fun is the ride. We study first, then we play sports trivia or word games on the trip to the meet, eat pizza and leak out little bits of our lives on the way back" (181). Participation in athletics not only helps fuel the mind as part of a healthy body, but also in *Whale Talk*, requires them to become better students.

After the season, T.J. invites all of the Cutter Mermen to take part in an upcoming 3-on-3 basketball tournament. T.J. derives significant pleasure from the fact that he has helped to create a group that is willing to compete together after they have finished their obligation to each other as members of the swim team. But T.J. believes that a good team is one where the enjoyment of the activity does not necessitate significant athletic prowess. He believes that the physical ability is irrelevant; he sees them "as a team of role-players" (225). Many times on high school teams the members, due to a similar passion for athletics will go on to participate on multiple teams together. Others, like Tay-Roy, may choose to pursue academic or artistic activities at the end of a season. However, one study found: "Thematic analysis indicated that peers typically played a positive function in supporting the continued involvement of talented adolescents in their talented activities" (Patrick 742). No one on the Cutter swim team shows any resentment towards those who move on to other things after the final swim meet. Instead, T.J. attempts to continue his friendships through athletics. His desire to continue incorporating his friends shows that a true bond has been established between the members of the Cutter High School swim team.

Although T.J. intends for the basketball tournament to be a way to get his friends together and play ball, the end of the novel takes a dark turn when Rich Marshall mistakenly shoot T.J.'s father instead of his girlfriend's daughter. After the tragedy at the basketball tournament, T.J. returns to his active lifestyle as a way to honor his father, cope with the loss, and maintain the friendships he has built. Coach Icko coaches a summer slow-pitch softball team that contains the entire team except Tay-Roy Kibble and Andy Mott, who both played on T.J.'s basketball team. The team is a losing one, but it keeps these young men together, and provides T.J. with friendship, camaraderie, and physical activity, all of which help him cope with the death of his father. T.J. acknowledges that this group has become an integral part of his life: "The heart of the team is a ghost of a short-stop, the world's largest first-baseman, and a right fielder in a Cutter letter jacket that he removes only when he feels faint from heat" (297). T.J. feels pride that he contributed to getting Chris Coughlin a letter jacket. Mr. Jones dying instructions to T.J. were to not spend even "one-minute" on taking revenge against any of the people that were involved with Rich Marshall, including Mike Barbour. T.J. knows that his father mean not simply avoiding vengeance, but continuing on a path that is actively positive, one involving the people T.J. has come to care for so strongly. He follows his father's advice by continuing to organize athletic activities for his social network.

Rich Marshall may have taken T.J.'s father, but he cannot take the relationships, lessons, and support the protagonist gains as a result of his participation on the swim team. T.J. should also feel good about providing his teammates with a new appreciation for athletics. The letterman's jacket, which was previously a symbol of collective exclusion, now symbolizes the personal effort and sacrifices everyone, especially Chris Coughlin, volunteered to undertake. The team provides T.J. with a support structure long after the end of the season. Instead of sitting at

home in bitter remorse, T.J. decides to lean on those relationships as part of his desire to heal the significant wound left by the death of his father.

Showing inclusivity and acceptance is critical to the sporting world Crutcher advocates for all people. Each character in *Whale Talk* benefits differently from the socialization he is forced to embrace as part of the team. T.J. learns to take instruction; Mott begins to embrace the extension of friendship that the team offers; Dan Hole discovers the art of light conversation; Chris Coughlin gains confidence in himself and others, and Jackie finally finds his voice, which until the end of the novel has been almost completely absent. Coach Simet sums up the ways which each team member made a positive contribution to the overall social dynamic of the team. He tells a group of parents that "This was a different kind of team than I've coached. Jackie Craig said his first words on the way to the state meet… Dan hole turned us Shakespearean, and Tay-Roy kept us supplied with interested females" (276). He goes on to add that Simon DeLong set a tone for every practice with a fierce determination to improve. Simet concludes his speech by adding that he does not know "an athlete in the world with more courage than Andy Mott" (276). Jackie's reticence to speak, and his ultimate triumph over that fear, teaches his teammates the need for patience when dealing with a person's fears. Dan Hole's presence assures everyone that there will not be a lack of intellectual conversation. Everyone except for T.J. and Tay-Roy has limited experience conversing with members of the opposite sex, but Simon, Chris, Jackie, and Mott learn to handle such encounters through their association with Tay-Roy. Simon speaks with his actions and determination, inspiring his more naturally athletic teammates. Andy Mott's courage becomes an example to everyone that a tragic circumstance is something that one can overcome given the right outlets for their own frustrations. Every member of the team has grown personally and socially, and each has contributed to an atmosphere which encourages the development of such attributes in the participants.

Chris Crutcher's *Whale Talk* depicts the importance of being physically fit in order to create better learning opportunities, foster stronger relationships, and develop positive life skills. T.J. Jones and his teammates learn the value of socialization, which creates a cohesive unit of empathy and goodwill. Because they have improved their social skills through their exposure to others during their time, the members of the swim team will be able to use those improved skills in interactions with all their peers. H.W. Marsh and S. Kleitman's article "School Athletic Participation: Mostly Gain with Little Pain" claims that the "development of an exciting program of athletics activities is likely to benefit all students" (223). What is unique about the team members in *Whale Talk* is that their presence does benefit the school by presenting an equal and respectful counter to the school's athletic council. From the time they enter the run-down pool of the local gym, they learn to adapt, focus, and self-motivate as athletes first. They gain positive role models, who help guide them for their best interest. The team as a whole, including the adults Simet and Icko, successfully fight against a school administration which condones humiliation. As a team, Chris's victory over Mike Barbour insures the team their letter jackets, corrects an injustice, and is a portrays elation that comes with perseverance in athletic pursuit. Chris Coughlin's triumph embodies the true spirit of athletics, one which is ultimately not concerned with any of those factors, because there is such a visceral level of pleasure received from simply doing the activity.

Like his counterpart Bo, T.J. has used sports in order to deal with various frustrations, and ultimately personal tragedy. Instead of poisoning the team with his anger, he uses it to push himself and his team during workouts. His example is observed and replicated by those around him, which produces a healthy environment for socialization. In Sarah Spengler and Alexander Woll's article, "The More Physically Active, the Healthier? The Relationship Between Physical Activity and Health-Related Quality of Life in Adolescents: The MoMo Study," they found that

adolescents who are physically active, "especially in sports clubs," had a higher quality of life. (708).[12] Notably, the participants who did a majority of their exercise in solitude did not experience the same benefits one finds in the socialization involved with being on a team. Participation on the swim team not only provides the boys an opportunity to test the metaphorical (and literal) waters of trust with their peers, but also provides ample time for that trust to grow.

In many ways, *Whale Talk* seems to be an extension of the major themes found in *Ironman*. Both stories are centered on an athletically motivated protagonist who helps spurs the creation of a team around their own passion for sports. Whether the events take place in the halls, classroom, or the pool, the members of the Cutter High-School swim team develop a passion for athletics which brings them together as a structured unit. The teams found in *Whale Talk*, as in much of Crutcher's fiction, represent an ideal level of loyalty and respect among the participants.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Careful examination of Chris Crutcher's *Ironman* and *Whale Talk* reveals that there is an increasing emphasis in the author's work regarding sports as the arbiter of personal health and socialization. Beginning with *Ironman*, Crutcher's earlier novel, one finds that there is a division between Bo's individual athletic endeavors and a social community which forms around his pursuits. Yet out of a mandatory school-sanctioned activity, Crutcher builds a team around the shared experience and empathy found in Mr. Nak's anger management group. At the end of the novel, Bo is surrounded by what can only be described as a team; the members travel together, plan for strategic advantages, and serve as a support staff for Bo. In turn, Bo feels an obligation to do his best as a way to honor the commitment of his friends. Shelly helps Bo during his grueling winter workouts; Elvis lends a hand in the weight room, and Hudgie gives Bo a crucial tactical advantage over his competition. In Crutcher's earlier novel, the purpose of athletic participation is meant to create socialization, a greater level of physical fitness, and a sense of benevolence towards one's peers.

In *Whale Talk,* Crutcher centralizes his narrative around a more traditional team sports narrative; it contains more complex adolescent stories, many of which contain physical or psychological abuse. Coach Benson and Rich Marshall aim to keep out the "undesirables;" anyone who is not a white, meat-eating, school-flag-waving, team sports jock. For those men, there is no place in the sporting community for a mentally challenged child or a nerd. T.J. and his teammates learn more compassion for Chris Coughlin because of the time they spend with him not only in the pool, but on the bus and outside the classroom. When T.J. finally relents and takes part in an official, albeit under-appreciated sports team, he purposefully seeks out those who are a part of the non-traditional athletic community as teammates. His inclusive attitude results in greater appreciation for his teammates among the athletic community.

The YA novel sports landscape is improving, especially when, as Brown puts it, notable authors like "Robert Lipsyte, Chris Crutcher, and Rich Wallace continue to publish excellent books, but they are now joined by a crew of talented younger authors like Matt de la Pena and Matthew Quick, as well as by some talented female authors like Sharon Flake, Donna Freitas, Lisa Luedeke, and Sarah Skilton" (79). With a rise in the popularity of these authors, YA sports literature seems to be breaking into a new era. Since Crutcher's first novel *Running Loose* was published in 1983, Crutcher has written 10 more books, including an autobiography, which focuses on his formative years growing up in Cascade, Idaho.[13] At the start of his writing career, Crutcher was one of only a handful of YA authors who wrote about sports and the adolescent experience, and now he has clearly set the stage for many to follow. Throughout Crutcher's career he has pushed the world of YA fiction, especially the genre of the *sportlerroman,* forward along with other writers who began focusing on character in sports fiction. From his earlier novel *Running Loose* to his collection of short stories *Athletic Shorts,* to his own autobiography, sports have found their way into almost every part of Crutcher's writing career. Similar to what the reader finds in *Ironman* and *Whale Talk,* his novels often lack the quintessential moment of victory. For Crutcher, the truth of the athletic experience goes far beyond the actual game, meet or match, and the emphasis on practice and team bonding runs throughout his fiction. Terry Murcko notes that Crutcher "writes what he knows with authority, verity, and authentic voice" (60).[14] As promised by his position as an early vanguard of sports based YA literature, Crutcher continues to publish quality work adding to his already impressive career.

For many secondary and high school teachers it is difficult to focus their students, given the number of distractions provided by technology and the Internet. Alan Brown claims: "In a digital, global world containing countless competitors to the act of reading, we must answer the call to present students with texts that offer innovative twists on the activities of their everyday

lives" (76). There is so much opportunity to socialize online that many people may find it less convenient to participate in athletic activities. By demanding physicality, involvement in team activities requires the participants to put down their phones, tablets, and other electronic appliances which contribute to a sedentary lifestyle.[15] Along with Crutcher, advocates of sports based Young Adult literature Alan Brown and Chris Crowe have been pushing for the use of such novels in middle and high school classrooms. Brown acknowledges the sports and literature have falsely been separated due to the modern misconception that academics and sports compete for a majority of adolescent attention during their formative years. Brown and Crowe claim that "sports are all too often considered as extracurricular, physical activity that pulls students away from more curricular, academic responsibilities, this extracurricular interest is precisely the connection that many students need to help foster a love of reading" (Brown 77). Crutcher's works can become a bridge between the physical and the academic.

Crutcher's fiction advocates a world where the adolescents are encouraged to be active in organizations which promote socialization and physical health. In one study, Rochelle M. Eime found that the most common psychological and social health benefits for athletic participants were "improved self-esteem, social interaction, followed by fewer depressive symptoms" (Eime 790). Crutcher's characters often lean toward individual sports as a way to avoid the problems which can come from carousing with others. But sports, "specifically, team sport seems to be associated with improved health outcomes compared to individual activities, due to the social nature of the participation" (790). Considering the rate in which obesity has risen in the in the United States alone, having literature that accurately depicts the benefits of interest in team exercise encourages young readers to develop their mental, physical and social skills.

Crutcher's fiction may often involve sports, but his stories have the complex characters, themes, and dialogue of American literature. As Crowe reminds, "good sports novels are really just novels, and as such, they provide opportunities for discussion of literary elements as well as discussion of important social issues such as bullying, peer pressure, drug and alcohol abuse, bigotry, emotional illness, and nearly anything else that is relevant in modern society" (Crowe 79). All of these issues are present somewhere in *Whale Talk*, and most of them are found in *Ironman*. Therefore, these are not only entertaining and well-written novels, but also they are exemplary tools for the classroom. The journey of his athletic protagonist within a sports frame is part of a greater narrative about the challenges facing a wide range of character types. Crutcher has touched on some of the most controversial and difficult themes available to authors, pedophilia, various forms of abuse, murder, eating disorders, to name a few. Because he includes larger themes found in adolescent life, Crutcher has been able to capture many new YA readers.

In addition, those in the sporting community should not exclude those of various sexual orientations, mental capacities, or racial backgrounds; instead, they should find ways to invite individuals of diverse backgrounds to join together behind a single goal. Perhaps, Crutcher's fiction can also shine a light on the potential of sports programs in relation to a community that fosters good physical and mental health. As Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin suggest, "given increasing elitism, institutionalization, and competition in youth sport, policy-makers must assure the accessibility of youth sports programs to all youth, regardless of socio-economic status, race, culture, ethnicity, of gender" *(Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin 32).* Crutcher depicts positive for youth development in his fiction, because he believes that teams are a great way to help adolescents expand their social circles to include people of every color and creed. Many of Crutcher's characters use sports as a way to combat the effects of bullying, trauma, or neglect. The tragedies in Columbine, Colorado, and Moses Lake, Washington, demonstrate that if these

topics are not approached in education and popular culture, terrible consequences will result. Crutcher uses sports in his novels as a way of creating dialogue, and thus empathy, in adolescent characters. A society filled with adolescents in good physical shape and empathetic attitudes would most likely be a much safer place for all of us to live.

Chris Crowe argues that sports have become so pervasive in modern culture that it affects contemporary society through language, community, fashion, and media (Crowe 129)[16]. If an author portrays sports in a negative light, it may influence adolescents to refrain from athletic activities. However, an overly nostalgic or oversentimental view would be disingenuous to the community the author is attempting to depict. Robert Lipsyte condemns any such view of the sporting world. He says that many times a cultural myth emerges around the sports arena: "an ultimate sanctuary, a university for the body, a community for the spirit, a place to hide that glows with that time of innocence when we believed that rules and boundaries were honored, that good triumphed over evil, and that the loose ends of experience could be caught and bound and delivered in an explanation as final and as comforting as a goodnight kiss." [17] In *Ironman* and *Whale Talk* athletics provide a kind of mental sanctuary for the protagonists, in which they can channel their fears, anger, and frustration while keeping their minds and bodies active, but, Crutcher presents athletics without the same nostalgic and optimistic world Lipsyte describes. The presence of a murder at a pickup basketball tournament in *Whale Talk* reminds the reader that the athletic world is very much a part of the "real world." Crutcher's fiction depicts sports in the truest sense; it is a platform for challenges, growth, and communication, where everyone can find a role.

The value of Crutcher's work extends far beyond YA sports literature or his work combining the athletic and academic. The most significant reason to use his work in the

classroom or recommend it to young people for pleasure reading is that it has sports as a superstructure in which to depict the difficult truths of life. *Ironman* and *Whale Talk* are both books about reluctant teammates, a reality experienced by almost every human. Whether it is in the classroom, the workplace, or a sports team, most the people we encounter are unlikely friends upon introduction. However, in Crutcher's text, his teams unite around each other, share memories, relate to the troubles others experience, and in addition get in great shape. Everyone could take a lesson from these two works about how to find commonalities with others. If the same levels of empathy and communication found in the teams in *Ironman* and *Whale Talk* were to occur on a larger scale in every day life, the world would be a much more inclusive place to live. Readers will notice that when such terrible things do happen to Crutcher's characters, particularly his athletes, they have a team to support them in the struggle. Chris Crutcher's novels depict a world where sports and this kind of team spirit provide a connecting point for people, not just athletes.

Notes

[1] Crutcher's recent career has produced useful but limited criticism. He receives a considerable amount of press for his repeated appearances on the American Library Association's Top 100 Banned Books list. In researching for this project, the ability to utilize internet sources, particularly interviews or talks given by Crutcher has provided significant insight into Crutcher's process as a writer, as well as biographical information. Terry Davis wrote *Presenting Chris Crutcher*, an incredibly well written book of criticism on Crutcher's work. Since the book was published in 1997, *Whale Talk* is not discussed within the text. Davis is a longtime friend of Crutcher's which allows him to provide insight into some of the author's feelings about his work. Robert Seelinger Trites' *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* examines the way adolescents have limited agency in some YA novels. She pays respect to the genre by juxtaposing some of the most well-known YA novels against classic literature. However, her work lacks any real commentary on the role of sports or athletics in Crutcher's fiction. There has also been work done on the ways Crutcher's fiction is an effective tool in English classrooms. Patricia M Hauschildt's *Teaching the Selected Works of Chris Crutcher*, provides possible lesson plans and activities that can bring out some of the major themes in Crutcher's novels. Her books also do not address the role of sports, and is most a guide to creating discussion and writing from students in the high-school or college classroom.

[2] Wiley Lee Umphlett characterizes the early juvenile novels as "a form of the highly popular success story pioneered by Horatio J. Alger Jr., juvenile sports novels, many of which were produced as series books structured around a central character (e.g., Frank Merriwell,

Baseball Joe), had societal approval in the main in that their primary objective was didactic: to teach young readers manly virtues such as fair play and the rewards of hard work in meeting a challenge and/or achieving a goal and, most importantly, to create a healthy respect for authority."

[3] Chris Crowe, *More Than a Game*: *Sports literature for Young Adults.* Many scholars show deference to Tunis for his contributions to sports fiction: "John R. Tunis was the pivotal figure in this improvement. After working as a freelance sports writer for several years, he wrote his first novel, *Iron Duke*, in 1983. … and Tunis's quality stories did more than the work of any other young adult writer to elevate sports fiction from pulp fiction beginnings" (Crowe 18) Jack Forman, "Young Adult Sports Novels: Playing for Real," *The Horn Book Magazine* .(1987). Forman also claims that Tunis began a movement in sports fiction which "began to focus on individual character rather than the moral value of competitive athletics." (Forman 502) "Without ever realizing it, John Tunis, through his serious approach to dramatizing sport's commitment to a code of values and it's impact on the athlete striving for quality performance within a team setting, was looking ahead to a more mature brand of adult fiction colored by American sports experience (Umphlett 14)

[4] Crowe, *More Than a Game*: "Crutcher has emerged as the most successful author of the sportlerroman even though he doesn't consider his novels as sports fiction. Crutcher has emerged as the most successful writer of sports fiction" (42).

[5] Found in Crowe, *More Than a Game*, 40.

[6] *Ironman* is not the first text in which Crutcher has used the term Stotan. In his second

novel, *Stotan*, published in 1986, Crutcher tells the story of Lionel Serbousek, who serves as Bo's coach in *Ironman*. The story Mr. Serbousek tells Bo which inspires him to practice the "stotan way" is based on the narrative of *Stotan*. In the story, Walker Dupree, is a similarly frustrated adolescent who learns to control his actions in emotions through his time on high school and college swim teams. One of Walker's best friends in the novel, a fellow stotan, is Lion Serbousek. Crutcher's use of this term throughout his fiction reveals that there is a link between what Crutcher considers to be a mentally, emotionally, and socially balanced athlete. Crutcher's reprisal of the term and the character of Lion Serbousek shows that many of the lessons and ideas surrounding athletics found in *Stotan* translate not only in other narrative contexts, but also across time and generation. Chris Crutcher has made a career writing about adolescents and sports. Sometimes the two subjects intertwine more intricately more so than in other works of his.

[7] Crutcher's strongest female character comes from another male-centered YA sports novel, *Staying Fat of Sarah Brynes*. However, in the story, the protagonist, Moby because romantically interested in Sarah Byrnes, who is physically and emotionally scared. One major connection both adolescents have is that they have anger issues that are only mitigated through athletic participation and friendship.

[8] For more, see R.W. Larson, 183.

[9] Jean Ann John, 11. "Research indicates that young adult literature represents a valuable tool providing adolescents models of civic behaviors. Although much research has been conducted on how young adult literature might be used in the classroom to teach civic values, none has examined the novels of Chris Crutcher for specific behaviors. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine Crutcher's novels for those values most associated with responsible

citizenship. These include: (a) reflective-decision making, (b)honesty, (c) tolerance, (d) compassion, (e) respect for the worth and dignity of others."

[10] See John 112

[11] Paul J. Adachi and Teena Willoughby follow up their study with further insight into a causal relationship between sports and social health:

> These findings represent important advances in our understanding of the link between involvement in sports and self-esteem. Perhaps if individuals are encouraged to find a sport they thoroughly enjoy at a young age, they may experience increases in self-esteem, which, in turn, may help set them on active and healthy trajectories that continue into their adolescent and adult years. (144)

[12] Sarah Spengler and Alexander Woll, conclude: "Being physically active especially in sports clubs is positively linked to higher HRQOL of adolescents" (708).

[13] Chris Crutcher's *King of the Mild Frontier* depicts many of the stories which define the formative years Crutcher spend in Cascade, Idaho, a town which would later be the basis for many of his fictional towns, including in Ironman and *Whale Talk*.

[14] Terry Murcko, 60.

[15] Alan Brown and Chris Crowe, 76.

[16] Chris Crowe, "Young Adult Literature: Sports Literature for Young Adults," (2001). Crowe elucidates: "Sports culture permeates almost every aspect of contemporary society. Language: when two strangers meet they must make small talk to fill the time, sports are now just as likely to come up as the weather is. Sports idioms, clichés, and metaphors appear regularly in our written and spoken language, from casual conversations to campaign speeches

and from academic articles to religious sermons. Community: today's successful athletes aren't just sports heroes, they're popular celebrities who are as well known and as recognizable as movie stars. Fashion: many of the clothes we wear are endorsed by athletes, designed in an athletic style, or marked by the Nike swoosh or some other sports insignia. Media: no modern daily newspaper can survive without a sports page; cable TV presents sports around the clock; sports talk radio thrives almost everywhere in the United States." (60)

[17] Neil D. Isaacs, 19.

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